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Introduction to special issue on 'authoritarian neoliberalism'

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Abstract
This article introduces readers to the special issue on 'authoritarian neoliberalism'. It charts the origins of the concept and summarizes the central arguments of the individual contributions to the special issue.

Keywords
2008 Global economic crisis, neoliberalism, authoritarianism, Nicos Poulantzas, Stuart Hall, far-right parties and movements

Introduction

The 2007–2008 global economic crisis appeared to deal a sharp blow to the processes of corporate-led globalization and financialization, which have become central features of the latest, neoliberal phase of capitalism that emerged during the 1970s (Mudge, 2008; Peck et al., 2010; Stockhammer, 2008; Toporowski, 2009). However, against the predictions of some progressive scholars and political activists (e.g. Klein, 2008; Stiglitz, 2008), the crisis failed to usher in the end of neoliberalism, both as a dominant ideology and mode of governance (Crouch, 2011; Davidson, 2017), and has done little to weaken the hegemony of the US as the world's only superpower (Panitch et al., 2015). On the contrary, there has been a striking convergence across the world in the implementation of neoliberal austerity measures, the growing support for right-wing xenophobic sentiments, the deployment of

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repressive state practices and the normalization of illicit financial transactions. Recent examples include the imposition of austerity measures against the will of democratically elected governments in the semi-periphery of the EU (i.e. Greece, Italy, Portugal) by the 'Troika' (the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF)), the rise of reactionary 'anti-globalist' movements and parties (from the Brexit vote in the UK, through the consolidation of 'illiberal' regimes in Turkey, Hungary and Russia respectively, to the rise of Donald Trump and the alt-Right in the US) and the spectacular cases of money laundering and tax evasion by global elites revealed in the *Luxembourg Leaks*, the *Panama Papers* and, most recently, the *Paradise Papers*. While the manifestations of these global trends have been contradictory and variegated, their consequences for working people around the world have, tragically, been quite consistent: the further entrenchment of inequality, precarity, unemployment and poverty (McNally, 2011; Piketty, 2014; Stiglitz, 2012).

The articles in this special issue seek to explain the relationship between neoliberalism and recent authoritarian trends across a broad range of critical theoretical perspectives and geographical contexts. The origins of the special issue can be traced to a collection of papers presented at the 7th Annual Conference of the *International Initiative for Promoting Political Economy* (IIPPE), held in Lisbon, Portugal, in 2016. One of the most prominent themes emerging from the panel presentations and discussions was that Ian Bruff's (2014) conceptualization of 'authoritarian neoliberalism' had proven a fecund point of departure for many of the presenters in theorizing the current conjuncture, offering a lucid way of thinking about how the evolution of neoliberalism could engender some of the recent authoritarian changes across the world. However, some panellists and discussants were equally critical of the concept, suggesting that it lacked theoretical coherence and that alternative conceptual formulations might offer a better vantage point for how to understand the linkages between neoliberalism and rising authoritarianism in the present era. The aim of this special issue is to extend these fruitful discussions in order to engage more deeply with the concept of authoritarian neoliberalism and to probe the extent of its theoretical, methodological and empirical utility, while simultaneously analysing a range of case studies that might be considered to lie at the forefront of recent authoritarian trends. In what follows, we provide a brief context for the emergence of the idea of authoritarian neoliberalism in the present era and outline how the articles in this special issue contend with it, both as concept and phenomenon.

Mainstream approaches to the political fallout from the financial crisis have, by and large, failed to provide convincing accounts of how the deepening of neoliberalism and ascendancy of authoritarian ideas and practices might be linked with each other. In response, critical scholars have illustrated the linkages between neoliberal globalization and the normalization of the 'populist' far-right, not only in Europe and the US, but also in a number of Asian and Latin American countries (Berezin, 2013; Chacko, 2018; Jayasuriya, 2018; Saad-Filho and Boito, 2015), the rejection of 'progressive' neoliberalism in favour of reactionary populism in the US (Fraser, 2017) and anti-cosmopolitan EU-scepticism in Britain and Europe (Callinicos, 2017; Nölke, 2017), the continuing decline of fiscal discretion and public investment across the world (Streeck and Mertens, 2013), the ascendance of cryptocurrencies like Bitcoin as a technological embodiment of far-right libertarian ideals (Golumbia, 2016) and the intensification of racialized and gendered violence across a variety of contexts (Burnett, 2013; Carastathis, 2015; Fekete, 2014; Sanders-McDonagh et al., 2016). Most notably for our purposes, however, Ian Bruff (2012, 2014)

has described these trends as indicative of the rise of authoritarian neoliberalism in the post-crisis era. To be clear, Bruff did not coin the term. Recurring references to authoritarian neoliberalism can be found as far back as the early 1990s and 2000s, in connection with the structural adjustment programs and pro-market reforms foisted on Chile as a 'social laboratory' for neoliberalism (e.g. Labra, 2002; Messner, 1992; Pitton, 2007; Silva, 1992; Taylor, 2002, 2003). Authoritarian neoliberalism has also been deployed in relation to Peru (Solfrini, 2001), Syria (Dahi and Munif, 2012), postcolonial African development (Zeleza, 2009) and Istanbul's urban redevelopment (Lovering and Türkmen, 2011). Meanwhile, Kiely (2017) used the analogous concept 'neoliberal authoritarianism' to describe a shift away from the technocratic economism of the Chicago School towards the kind of liberalism with authoritarian features touted by Hayek and other early neoliberal thinkers. And critical theorist Henry Giroux (2004, 2015, 2014) has dedicated much of his academic career to examining the sociological intersection between public pedagogy, neoliberal ideology and creeping forms of authoritarianism in everyday American life, which he has referred to as 'neoliberal authoritarianism' in recent years (see Giroux, 2015, 2017).

But Bruff was perhaps the first thinker to provide a clear-sighted definition for authoritarian neoliberalism, applying it as a theoretical concept to explain a set of political and economic phenomena which appeared to be occurring in unison across the world. According to Bruff, authoritarian neoliberalism describes a global shift in state-market relations, centred around legal and constitutional reforms that increasingly disenfranchise subordinate groups and populations by rendering democratic institutions marginal to the political decision-making process and moving policy-making beyond the domain of popular contestation. While authoritarian neoliberalism does not constitute a 'wholesale break' with the dominant mode of neoliberal governance that prevailed prior to 2007, it does nevertheless signal a *qualitative* change in how state power is wielded by dominant groups in order to maintain hegemony – specifically, via a range of coercive and legal measures that aim to insulate the state from popular contestation (Bruff, 2014: 116; Bruff and Tansel, 2018). The move towards authoritarian neoliberalism also entails broader cultural shifts presaged by the work of Stuart Hall, which can be seen in the moralizing of austerity by elites after the crisis and the media's role in promoting debt-driven consumption (Bruff, 2014; Bruff and Tansel, 2018). However, drawing on the work of Poulantzas (1978), Bruff (2014) suggests that the outcome of authoritarian neoliberalism entails immense contradictions for the state, such that even as the state is undoubtedly strengthened through the side-lining of democratic institutions, it is simultaneously weakened by chronic legitimation crises. And crucially for progressives, the fragility of the authoritarian neoliberal state and the concomitant decline in mass political parties provides windows of opportunity for radical politics on both ends of the political spectrum, with far-right movements having so far outflanked movements on the left.

The contributions to this special issue intervene at various points in Bruff's explication of authoritarian neoliberalism, but in general, the order of the articles' presentation follows a trajectory from theory to application. The first pair of articles attempt to tease apart contradictions that are argued to lie at the core of the concept in order to construct more theoretically robust approaches to understanding the relationship between authoritarianism and neoliberalism in the present era. Matthew Ryan, for example, offers a sympathetic critique 'with and against' authoritarian neoliberalism that acknowledges the immense importance of the discussions galvanized by the concept, but remains sceptical of its current articulations. In particular, Ryan doubts whether Bruff's conception, which pivots on a qualitative

distinction between the pre- and post-2008 crisis eras, offers a useful periodization that reflects the historical development of 'actually-existing' neoliberalism. By examining the cases of Thatcherism in the UK and the recent crises in the EU, Ryan demonstrates the presence of authoritarian neoliberalism on either side of the temporal divide erected by Bruff, casting doubt on whether the post-2008 form of neoliberalism is in fact qualitatively distinct from what came before. Without rejecting the notion entirely, Ryan argues that an understanding of authoritarian neoliberalism that focuses on deepening state transformations in the current era rather than qualitative shifts allows us to connect neoliberal policy-making of the past to the anti-establishment, anti-political ruptures characteristic of the current 'organic crisis' of capitalism. This is aptly demonstrated in the historical line drawn directly from the authoritarian statist tendencies of Thatcherite neoliberalism to Brexit.

Along the same vein, Etienne Schneider and Sune Sandbeck recognize the significance of Bruff's concept as a touchstone for critical discussion around present-day authoritarianism, but like Ryan, they remain unconvinced of the theoretical utility of authoritarian neoliberalism and question whether it truly offers an improvement over the analytical categories that inform it. Specifically, the authors argue that the idea of *authoritarian statism* in its original Poulantzasian guise has the potential to provide a more historically accurate periodization of neoliberalism and a clearer distinction between various logics of authoritarianisms, both internal and external to neoliberalism itself. The main drawback of Poulantzas' conception of authoritarian statism lies in its failure to anticipate the degree to which transnational structures of governance could extend the constitutional and legal circumventions of liberal democracy, while simultaneously intensifying the 'strengthening-weakening' dynamic confronting the capitalist state. Using the expanded concept, transnational authoritarian statism, Schneider and Sandbeck examine the architecture of the Eurozone to illustrate how features ascribed to authoritarian neoliberalism have been present in the make-up of the European Monetary Union from the very beginning. And against Bruff, the authors note that the 'new' authoritarianisms of the Right subscribe to a different logic, aiming to re-politicize precisely that which transnational authoritarian statist projects such as European integration had so effectively rendered apolitical.

Adam Fabry shares some of the theoretical reservations expressed by the first two contributions, but avers that authoritarian neoliberalism nevertheless remains useful in highlighting the linkages between the ascendancy of far-right regimes and neoliberal restructuring in specific contexts, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe. Hungary offers a particularly instructive example given that the rise of the de facto far-right Orbán regime can be traced directly back to Hungarian neoliberal reforms implemented in the early 1990s, which were widely credited with Hungary's golden age of economic success from 1997 to 2006. As Fabry reveals, however, this success obscured the extent of Hungary's structural problems – chronic underemployment, stark wealth inequality and entrenched poverty (hitting the country's Roma minority particularly hard) –which were eroding the foundations of the welfare contract and the state's capacity to forestall painful austerity measures given rising deficits; all of which came to a head during the 2008 global economic crisis. While the ascendancy of Orbán's ethno-nationalist regime following Hungary's economic downturn and subsequent political crisis might appear to break with its neoliberal past, Fabry offers ample evidence to suggest that it in fact constitutes an inflection of this past in a manner that is entirely consistent with the authoritarian tendencies inherent in neoliberalism and Hungary's capitalist development. This, Fabry argues, also explains why international institutions, such as the IMF or the EU, have shown so little interest in opposing the Orbán regime.

Finally, Cameron Smith attempts to extend the concept of authoritarian neoliberalism by linking it to the specifically racialized character of neoliberal reforms through an examination of Australia's border-industrial complex. While Smith recognizes that the notion has been critiqued for a certain degree of conceptual broadness, he nevertheless avers that there are significant advantages in the concept's ability to treat ostensibly isolated political phenomena as interlocking. In the case of the border-industrial complex, this opens the way to interrogating the apparent contradiction that even as neoliberalism has entailed near-frictionless mobility for capital, movement by certain groups of people has become increasingly curtailed through authoritarian and violent means. Smith draws on critical race scholarship to suggest that these violent borders are always-already relations of ongoing colonial power that are themselves structured by discriminatory and exclusionary categories of race. The Australian border – *qua* technology of racial differentiation and exclusion – therefore functions under authoritarian neoliberalism to ensure that only those migrants beneficial to capital are admitted while simultaneously yielding profits for transnational capital through the creeping privatization of the border-industrial complex.

Taken together, the contributions to this special issue on authoritarian neoliberalism significantly broaden our understanding of how authoritarianism is able to proliferate within the political and economic structures of late capitalism. More importantly perhaps, they extend the critical debates opened up by Bruff's (2014) intervention into the relationship between the changing political terrain of neoliberalism and the new modes of authoritarian governance that have appeared across the globe since the 2008 financial crisis. Grasping the precise nature of this connection is not simply a theoretical exercise but a vital component of building strategic political responses to the deterioration of democracy worldwide.

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